

Interview with Serena Massa,
The scientific coordinator of the Italian groups.



Adulis: Site of Breakthrough in Archaeological findings

Interview conducted by: Luwam Kahsay H

Italian archaeologists, who are affiliated to the Research Center on Eastern Desert, Politecnico di Milano, Universita Cattolica di Milano, Universita Orientale di Napoli, Universita dell'Insubria di Varese partnered with the Piccini Group and the Eritrean Commission of Sport and Culture to share their knowledge with young Eritrean archaeologists. They have given two-week courses on Research and Conservation of heritage.

Following is an interview with Serena Massa, the scientific coordinator of the Italian groups.

Introduce yourself to our readers, please.

My name is Serena Massa. I have been an Archaeologist for almost 30 years. I have worked as a lecturer not only in Italy but also in many universities. I've conducted many archaeological field research studies in the Mediterranean, in Northern Africa, Libya and Iran. My type of archaeology is Public Archaeology, which means archaeology that contributes to a better life condition for the present and for the future. So it is not only to recover beautiful objects to display in museums but it is really to find how ancient people used the environment and

used it in the most reasonable way compared to modern civilization and to learn from traditional ways of managing soil and water resources and so on.

What have you contributed during your stay in Eritrea?

I have been in Eritrea for ten years more or less by chance because in 2010 in Italy I met Alfredo e Angelo Castiglione, the Twins, who are the creators of Adulis Project with the Commission of Sport and Culture, President of Eritrea and authorities and Mr. Asmerom Mokonen, and the Piccini Group. As they needed an archaeologist with experience in the field, two years later they asked me for help and I thought ‘why not give it a try.’ So I came and started to study Eritrean archaeological heritage starting from Adulis. I was really amazed by your heritage because of its richness and connection with a very wide net of exchange between the Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.



The Horn of Africa is a very crucial place for this cultural interchange and interconnection. Coming to the Horn of Africa, you don't have anything like this except Adulis, a stone town of 40 hectares which is very surprising and it needs to be studied as it is very fascinating. What are your specific findings in Eritrea? When I went to Adulis in 2012, they already had one field work that had started in 2011. At the beginning everything was covered by sand and bushes. There was quite nothing apart from a trench made by a French expedition in the 16th century which is ruined as they didn't care at all at conserving it. I was really concerned and called my started to bring to light disappeared monument which nobody knew. At the beginning we discovered an early Christian church in the central northern sector of what we know is the town though we don't specifically know the limit of the border. Then after two years another big Eastern Church came to light. In the last two campaigns we discovered a British church.

Did you notice any difference between what you have studied in the papers and what you have seen with your naked eyes?

By the end of the 7th and beginning of the 8th centuries, Aulis disappeared due to a violent and sudden event, initially by an earthquake followed by a flood which covered the town with thick deposits of sand and silt. It also became a victim of Arabic conquests. Little by little we are discovering the city and its connection with the sea because Adulis was a very important trading center possibly before the Christian era as the excavation of the last century by the Italian archaeologist, Roberto Paribeni, in the South Western part of the town shows prehistoric levels going back to the 2nd millennium B.C. Therefore, the contribution of our work now is such that we question the traditional perception that urban civilization came from the highlands and spread to the sea and claim that urban civilization came by the sea and spread to the highlands. Also, because on the coastal lowlands you have the most ancient traces of human presence like Buia, Galala, port found near Adulis and also in Buri peninsula and somehow, we think Adulis is connected to these places in prehistoric times. Thus, we are trying to demonstrate what we have seen using archaeology.



What would you like to say about Eritrea in regard to your profession?

I believe that this country has an extraordinary heritage, not only Adulis but many other sites in the highlands like Buia, Galala, Kohaito, Metera, Keskesse and Asmara. The Asmara plateau has important prehistoric settlement that needs to be studied further. In order to do so we are working with Eritrean

archaeologists as we can't be here forever and mostly because it is up to the new generation to continue studying its heritage.

What is the main objective of the course you are giving?

Due to the hot climate [the archaeological sites in Adulis] we only can stay here two months per year. So, we can't cover as much as needed. The objective is to transfer the knowledge about the methodology and how to operate in archaeological sites so as to prepare them for the new field work in Adulis in the next campaign of the upcoming years, hoping that Covid-19 will allow this. This course is extending for two weeks. There were courses in the past that started in 2020 but had to be suspended due to the pandemic. We intend to continue for the next year also.

What are the final expectations of this course?

Mostly the knowledge achieved by the participants and the skills that every one of them will develop. Every archaeologist has an inclination in an aspect of the discipline consisting of various interdisciplinary methodologies such as biology, mathematics, aerial survey and many more. All the methodology has been illustrated in the course and each of them will present the results at the end of the course.

Any final remarks.

The beauty of this country is its people who are very welcoming and lovely and Asmara is like little Rome. We are very happy to be here. It is a wonderful country that deserves a more objective consideration from the outside because very wrong things are said by the media.

Eritrea Profile